

Message Text

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ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SIL-01 LAB-04 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIE-00 NSCE-00 INRE-00 SSO-00 EB-08 COME-00
TRSE-00 PC-01 AID-05 /071 W
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O R 282250Z FEB 78
FM AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5497
AMEMBASSY MANAGUA
AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE
AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA
USCINCSO

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 GUATEMALA 1228

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, GT
SUBJ: GOVERNMENT WORKERS STRIKE COULD DELAY ELECTIONS

1. SUMMARY: GROWING STRIKE OF KEY PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS
THREATENS TO DELAY ELECTORAL PROCESS. ALTHOUGH PRESIDENT LAUGERUD
HAS REFUSED TO NEGOTIATE "AT GUNPOINT," GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO
RESOLVE PROBLEM GO ON. QUESTION IS WHETHER SOLUTION CAN BE
FOUND IN TIME TO AVOID POSTPONEMENT OF MARCH 5 ELECTION.
CONSIDERATION IS PRESENTLY BEING GIVEN TO THE USE OF RADIO
STATIONS OF INDE(AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR POWER DEVELOPMENT) TO
FILL IN FOR POSTS AND TELEGRAPHS. AIR FORCE WOULD FLY BALLOTS
TO VOTING SITES.

2. SOME POLITICIANS AND OTHERS HAVE CLAIMED THE STRIKE IS
POLITICALLY INSPIRED. FINGERS POINT TO THOSE GROUPS INTERESTED
IN INTERRUPTING OR DISCREDITING ELECTORAL PROCESS, INTER ALIA,
FAR LEFT, FAR RIGHT AND THE FORCES OF MANUEL COLOM, WHOSE PARTY'S
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REGISTRATION HAS BEEN BLOCKED. LURKING IN THE MINDS OF
SOME OBSERVERS IS THE FEAR THAT THE STRIKE MAY SERVE AS
A PRETEXT FOR THE MILITARY TO STEP IN SHOULD THE SITUATION
DETERIORATE.

3. RASH OF STRIKES JUST PRIOR TO VOTING DAY HAS BEEN PATTERN
IN PREVIOUS TWO PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS. ALSO PART OF THE

PATTERN IS THE LAST MINUTE RUSH BY THE ELECTION AUTHORITIES TO COMPLETE THE WORK NEEDED FOR ACTUAL BALLOTING AND REPORTING OF RESULTS OF THE ELECTION TO AUTHORITIES AND TO THE PUBLIC. AMID STRIKE AND THE USUAL PRE-ELECTORAL RUMORS, THERE ARE SOME SIGNS OF PANIC BUYING AND HOARDING. END SUMMARY.

4. GOVERNMENT WORKERS PETITIONED THE GOVERNMENT FOR A PAY INCREASE EARLY LAST YEAR, BUT THEIR REQUEST WENT UNHEEDED. THE EMERGENCY COMMITTEE OF GOVERNMENT WORKERS (CETE) DECLARED A STRIKE FEBRUARY 23. THE DIRECTORATE OF THE CETE HAD MET EARLIER IN THE WEEK WITH PRESIDENT LAUGERUD WHO ASKED FOR TIME TO STUDY THE MATTER. AT A MEETING OF UNION LEADERS OF THE VARIOUS GOVERNMENTAL UNITS FROM THE CAPITAL AS WELL AS OTHER MAJOR CENTERS, IT WAS DECIDED TO DECLARE A STRIKE. (STRIKES BY GOVERNMENT WORKERS ARE PROHIBITED BY LAW.)

5. TO DATE SUPPORT HAS BEEN SLOW IN COMING (A FEW THOUSAND OUT OF A TOTAL GOVERNMENT WORK FORCE OF 85,000 WHICH DOES NOT INCLUDE SOME TENS OF THOUSANDS OF "CONTRACT" WORKERS). INITIALLY POST AND TELEGRAPH WORKERS, SOME HOSPITAL WORKERS AND PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS STRUCK. OVER THE WEEKEND LITTLE HAPPENED AND ON MONDAY A NUMBER OF GOVERNMENT LABOR ORGANIZATIONS HELD MEETINGS TO DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT TO STRIKE. AS OF FEBRUARY 28, WORKERS FROM THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE AND SOME FROM LABOR MINISTRY AND FROM ROADS DEPARTMENT HAVE JOINED THE STRIKE. ALSO TELEPHONE, CUSTOMS AND BANK WORKERS.

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6. OF IMMEDIATE CONCERN IS THE STRIKE OF POST AND TELEGRAPH WORKERS. THIS AGENCY PLAYS IMPORTANT ROLE IN ELECTIONS IN DELIVERING BALLOTS AND ELECTION MATERIAL AS WELL AS PROVIDING MEANS FOR COMMUNICATING RESULTS BACK TO CAPITAL. CETE OFFICIALS HAVE REFUSED PLEA OF GOVERNMENT, MEDIA AND POLITICIANS TO PUT OFF THE STRIKE UNTIL AFTER THE ELECTIONS. THE HAVE ALSO DENIED ANY POLITICAL TIES BETWEEN STRIKE DECISION AND THE CALL BY FUR'S MANUEL COLOM FOR VOTERS TO ABSTAIN. ACCORDING TO CETE, STRIKE IS EXCLUSIVELY A MATTER OF WORKERS BEING UNABLE TO COPE WITH THE RISING COST OF LIVING.

7. MEANWHILE THE GOVERNMENT IS MAKING EFFORTS TO CARRY OUT THE ELECTION ON SCHEDULE ON MARCH 5, ALTHOUGH IT IS POSSIBLE UNDER ELECTORAL LAW TO RECONVOKE IT FOR SUNDAY, MARCH 12. THE GOVERNMENT HAS CALLED ON THE MILITARY TO FILL SOME OF THE GAPS. FOR INSTANCE, THE AIR FORCE WILL HELP FLY BALLOTS TO OUTLYING AREAS. MILITARY AND OTHER STILL FUNCTIONING GOVERNMENT TRANSPORTATION CAN FURTHER DISTRIBUTE ELECTION DOCUMENTS. THE POWER DEVELOPMENT AGENCY (INDE) IS BEING COUNTED ON TO ANNOUNCE ELECTION RESULTS THROUGH ITS RADIO SUBSTATIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY. A SOLUTION MUST BE FOUND

FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PETEN SINCE INDE HAS NO SUBSTATIONS THERE. MOREOVER, INDE WORKERS ARE GIVING CONSIDERATION TO JOINING THE STRIKE.

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8. PRESIDENT LAUGERUD ANNOUNCED LAST WEEK THAT HE WOULD NOT NEGOTIATE "WITH A PISTOL POINTED AT HIS CHEST." HE HAD HOWEVER ORDERED THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE TO PREPARE A STUDY SHOWING WHAT GOVERNMENT RESOURCES WERE AVAILABLE TO MEET WORKER DEMANDS. THE STUDY IS DUE TODAY (FEB 28) AND THE CABINET IS SCHEDULED TO MEET LATER THIS AFTERNOON TO EXAMINE THE PROBLEM. IN CONCILIATORY GESTURE, GOVERNMENT HAS ANNOUNCED IT WILL PERMIT STRIKERS TO PICK UP THEIR PAYCHECKS FOR PAST MONTH.

9. ON THE ELECTION SIDE, BOTH THE NATIONAL PRINTING OFFICE AND THE ELECTORAL REGISTRY ARE WORKING OVERTIME TO MEET THE ELECTION DEADLINE. BALLOTS FOR THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS (OVER 1.7 MILLION OF THEM) HAVE BEEN DELIVERED TO THE REGISTRY. THE PRINTING OFFICE PROMISES THE BALLOTS (SAME AMOUNT) FOR THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS SHORTLY. ALTHOUGH THE HEAD OF THE ELECTORAL REGISTRY ACKNOWLEDGED THE POSSIBILITY OF POSTPONING THE ELECTIONS UNTIL MARCH 12, THE OFFICE OF PRESIDENT LAUGERUD (WHO HAS RESPONSIBILITY FOR SETTING THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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DATE) HAS ANNOUNCED THE ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD ON MARCH 5 AS SCHEDULED.

10. COMMENT: LAST MINUTE CONFUSION AT ELECTION TIME IS NOT UNKNOWN IN GUATEMALA. IN 1974, TWO GROUPS WERE ON STRIKE INCLUDING THE SOCIAL SECURITY WORKERS. (MOREOVER, THE AIR FORCE, COMMERCIAL AND PRIVATE AVIATION WERE CALLED UPON THEN ALSO TO DELIVER BALLOTS, ETC., A FEW DAYS PRIOR TO THE ELECTION.) ACCORDING TO ONE SOURCE, IN 1970 SOME SIX UNIONS WERE ON STRIKE. IN THE PRESENT INSTANCE, CENTRAL PLAZA IN FRONT OF THE NATIONAL PALACE HAS BEEN FILLED FOR ALMOST A WEEK WITH PROTESTING WORKERS FROM A HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT IN AGUACAPA. AFTERNOON NEWS REPORTS THAT BAKERS, WHO WERE DENIED A PAY RAISE AT CHRISTMAS, HAVE NOW JOINED STRIKE. THEREFORE, WHILE A POLITICAL CONNECTION MAY EXIST WITH RESPECT TO GOVERNMENT WORKERS, THERE IS NO CONVINCING EVIDENCE THAT THE STRIKE IS NOT PRINCIPALLY AN ECONOMIC PROTEST BY INFLATION-PRESSED LABOR ORGANIZATIONS WHICH BELIEVE THAT FOR ONCE THEY HAVE THE GOVERNMENT OVER A BARRELL.

11. ONE CAN EASILY FAULT THE GOVERNMENT FOR DILATORY TACTICS WITH RESPECT TO ITS WORKERS. A LACK OF RESOURCES IS NOT ALL THAT PLAUSIBLE CONSIDERING THE GOVERNMENT DECLARED A BUDGET SURPLUS LAST YEAR OF \$50 MILLION. HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT HAS MAINTAINED THAT PRESIDENT LAUGERUD HAS BEEN GENEROUS WITH WORKERS AND THAT INCREASES IN HIS ADMINISTRATION HAVE EXCEEDED THE TOTAL GRANTED BY THE PREVIOUS SIX ADMINISTRATIONS.

12. NEWS REPORTS ABOUT THE STRIKE ARE INACCURATE AND CONFLICTING. AMID THE USUAL RUMORS AND PRE-ELECTORAL TALK, GUATEMALANS ARE GOING ABOUT PREPARING AS BEST THEY CAN BY STOCKING UP AND EVEN HOARDING. AGAIN THIS REFLECTS THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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EXPERIENCE OF PREVIOUS ELECTIONS, AGGRAVATED NO DOUBT BY THE DEPRIVATION OF THE EARTHQUAKE PERIOD. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE AT THIS POINT TO TELL IF THE STRIKE WILL BE BROUGHT TO A PROMPT END. THERE IS SOME CONCERN IN POLITICAL CIRCLES THAT SHOULD THE SITUATION DETERIORATE IT WOULD BE USED BY THE MILITARY AS A PRETEXT TO TAKE SOME ACTION WHICH WOULD INTERRUPT DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN GUATEMALA. ANDREWS

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